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ABSTRACT

The ways in which people described their own interpersonal relationships were examined along the universally acknowledged relational dimensions control and affiliation. A total of 216 undergraduate communication students wrote about one of three types of relationships they had: best liked friend of the opposite sex, (60), best liked friend of the same sex, (90), and least liked other (66). Analysis showed that relationships were described in terms of affect, approach-avoidance, and structure. Subjects characterized their positive relationships in terms of support and their negative relationships in terms of incongruity. Importantly, control emerged not as a significant dimension but as a subset of structure. Control was seen as just one of the many types of constraints, limits, and obligations used to organize relationships. Affect appeared broader than previously considered, encompassing several cognitive and behavioral components. Support was seen as a caregiving/caretaking dimension. Approach-avoidance was an indication of the inclusiveness of the relational system. Incongruity in negative relationships was seen to encompass the insincerity enacted by people who were forced into a relationship and were trying to "put a good face on it." (Author/RL)

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DIMENSIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS REVISITED

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Abstract

This paper examines the way in which people describe their own relationships, and compares those descriptions to the universally acknowledged relational dimensions, Control and Affiliation. Subjects wrote descriptions of one of three types of relationships: best liked opposite sex friend, best liked same sex friend, or least liked other. Through content analysis it was found that relationships were described in terms of Affect, Approach-Avoidance and Structure. In addition, subjects characterized their positive relationships in terms of Support and their negative relationships in terms of Incongruity. Importantly, Control did not emerge as a significant dimension. Rather, it appeared as a sub-set of Structure, and is just one of the many types of constraints, limits and obligations which organize relationships. Affect appears broader than previously considered, encompassing several cognitive and behavioral components. Support is a caregiving or caretaking dimension. Approach-Avoidance is an indication of the inclusiveness of the relational system. Incongruity in negative relationships encompasses the insincerity enacted by people who are forced into a relationship and try to "put a good face on it."

DIMENSIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS REVISITED

While playwrites and poets have long attended to how people talk about and describe their interpersonal relationships, social scientists have opted for a descriptive language quite different from the rest of the population. This is the case, at least, when relationships other than their own are the subject of inquiry.

It is our intention to explore the manner in which people describe their own relationships and how those descriptions compare and contrast with social science conceptualizations about human relationships in general. At the center of this inquiry is a concern with how people experience their relationships. This concern is intertwined with, but conceptually separate from the more usual concern (for researchers) of how relationships may be "objectively" described by an observer. In this report, we will review traditional conceptualizations of relationships, and will argue for an alternative procedure for assessing relational definitions. Data are presented which both demonstrate the utility of our procedure and shed new light on how people experience their relationships. In the process we attempt to shift the social science perspective of relationships from a monadic orientation to an interactional, systemic one.

Characteristics of Interpersonal Relationships

While a variety of characteristics of interpersonal relationships have been named, scholars studying relational phenomena are in substantial agreement that there are two universal dimensions or components of human interaction. These have been variously named, but we will refer to these dimensions here by their contemporary short hand, control and affiliation. Support for their centrality in relationships comes from an extraordinarily broad range of studies, using a variety of methodologies (cf. Brown, 1965; Carson, 1969). Researchers

investigating such phenomena as pronoun usage (Brown & Gilman, 1960), terms of address (Ervin-Tripp, 1972), psychopathology in families (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), communicator style (Ellis, 1978; Norton, 1977), interaction in families (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Mark, 1971), nonverbal behavior (Mehrabian, 1972) and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Schutz, 1966) all offer evidence supporting these dimensions. The most significant research approach for our purposes, however, is factor analytic studies, most of which have been conducted on small task groups.

The factor analytic studies are of particular importance because the procedure has been widely used and is regarded by many as the best procedure for generating meaningfully parsimonious descriptions of interpersonal behavior. Much of this work was influenced by Bales' (1950) analysis of small group interaction. In essence, Bales named two general types of interaction characterizing communication in small groups: task-oriented, which is a control dimension; and social-emotional oriented, an affiliation dimension. Subsequent work in this area by Carter (1954), Borgatta (1960, 1962, 1963, 1964); Borgatta, Cottrell & Mann, (1958) and others demonstrated that control- and affiliation-oriented components of interaction could be identified in a variety of types of task groups. These are the only two dimensions identified consistently and are usually the first two factors to emerge.

Even researchers using a circumplex to model interpersonal behavior (Becker & Krug. 1964; Bochner, Kaminski & Fitzpatrick, 1977; Foa & Foa, 1972; Leary, 1957; and Lorr & McNair, 1965) have confirmed the results regarding the ubiquitiousness of control and affiliation in interpersonal relations. Not only did control and affiliation consistently emerge as primary factors, they did so in a variety of relational contexts, including parent-child and adult social relationships in addition to the much-studied task group. Typically,

control emerged as the factor which accounted for most of the explained variance (e.g., Bochner at al., 1977), a finding which has contributed to the pre-eminent attention it has received by scholars researching relational communication (e.g., Sluzki & Beavin, 1977; Millar & Rogers, 1976; Mark, 1971; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Despite this consensus we believe that previous research may have distorted or obscured the dimensionality of interpersonal relationships in three important ways. First, most of the research constrained subject response to that it was well outside normal relational communication patterns. The small group provides a convenient arena of study, but it is unlikely that behavior patterns enacted there generalize well to social situations, especially intimate social situations. Further, most of the groups studied were contrived laboratory or classoom groups, whose members had little or no commitment to the relationships formed and who shared little history. Within this context, only relatively positive relationships emerged. Even though coding schemes allowed for the observation of negative behaviors, the nature of the relationships themselves are seldom directly reported; our experience with such groups leads us to believe that the majority of relationships fall in the neutral to positive range. Also a problem with much of this research is the nature of measuring instruments from which inferences about relationship characteristics are made. Previous measurement attempts have not fully represented the universe of relational characteristics; scales selected a priori may reflect investigator bias rather than subjects' experience. To the extent that people are constrained to describe their own behavior within a relationship in terms of a limited set of preselected characteristics, they will so respond. That the resulting description might be a "force fit" is seldom considered.

Second, most research cited above is monadic in orientation. By this we mean

that individuals, not relationships are studied. As Watzlawick et al. (1967) point out, relational systems are like other systems in that they are different than the sum of their parts. To get an accurate picture of a relationship, it is necessary to focus on the interdependencies of the relational partners. The personal characteristics of each partner are important to the relationship, but it is the fitting together of these characteristics that defines the relational system.

Third, some of the circumplex research produced evidence that control and affiliation are not orthogonal dimensions. The potential significance of this fact has yet to be explored.

A Relational Analysis System

To address these difficulties with previous research, a theoretical framework which is relational (i.e., systemic) and which is minimally contraining to respondents is necessary. The "interactional view" articulated by Bateson (1972) and his colleagues (cf., Watzlawick et al., 1967; Watzlawick & Weakland, 1977) provides a foundation for this framework. The interactional view is consistent with extant research in that it too holds control and affiliation to be central characteristics of relationships. At the same time, however, its emphasis is on behavior patterns in relationships, and not on individuals.

Given the foundation laid by Bateson, a phenomenological approach to the study of interpersonal relationships is most appropriate. By this we mean not just non-experimental research, but research that focuses on subjects' unconstrained behavior. In instances where the behavior of interest is unavailable for observation (either because the subjects consider it "private" or because it is cognitive), subjects' reports are the next best alternative. Indeed, Harré and Secord (1972) argue that social behavior cannot be adequately explained in any other way. This approach is consistent with the notion of the language/reality

relationship, articulated by Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1941) and elaborated by symbolic interactionists (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969). Peoples' experience of reality is mediated by their language, especially as it is used to form social systems. Descriptions of the world are (or become) peoples' experience of the world. Therefore, we maintain that the best, if not only, way to gain insight into other person's understanding of their relationships to examine the language of relationships.

The mathematical precision of factor analysis and the tyranny of Occam's Razor not withstanding, the study of relational systems requires that the complexity of those systems, as experienced by system members, be considered. Consequently, the best indication of the characteristics (or dimensions) of relationships is respondents' descriptions of their own relationships.

The type of relational analysis which we suggest also requires that the two-dimension conceptualization be scrutinized. Control and affiliation have both been conceived as properties which individuals possess--personality traits or communicative styles, if you will. But it is not clear how a relationship, studied apart from the individuals, can "possess" these characteristics; consider control. In the sense of limiting or constraining behavior of individuals, a relationship does control. To the extent the rules and norms of a relationship (i.e., the shared expectations, implicit or explicit, of the relational participants) structure or delineate appropriate behavior, a relationship is controlling. We will develop this position later in this report in relation to the data we present.

Affiliation presents less of a problem in translating into relational terms. Especially in light of our reconceptualization of control, affiliation can be considered as a mutual expectation of either positive or negative effect. More than that, however, affiliation must involve the expression of inclusiveness

(or exclusiveness) as a characteristic of the relationship--the affirmation of "us" as a unit.

A final point is the importance of considering negative relationships in a comprehensive study of the characteristics of relationships. There are no data to indicate that negative relationships are merely the flip side of positive relationships, although this seems to be implicitly accepted by many researchers. We will offer data to the contrary. First, however, we will proceed to a discussion of how the data were generated.

METHOD

The phenomenological perspective maintained in this study required that the primary sources of relational descriptions were the actual participants in interpersonal relationships, and that subjects' responses were minimally constrained by the investigators. Unlike previous studies of the dimensions of interpersonal communication, subjects were not required to respond in terms of bipolar scales chosen a priori by the investigator.

Subjects

Subjects were two hundred sixteen undergraduate students enrolled in two communication courses at a West coast university. Aproximately half were males.

Procedures

Subjects responded to a questionnaire designed to elicit description of a long-standing interpersonal relationship under one of three relational conditions. Ninety subjects described their relationship with their best liked, same sex friend (BLSS); sixty with the best liked, opposite sex friend (BLOS); and sixty-six with their least liked other (LL).

Analysis

Relational descriptions generated by subjects were abbreviated by two coders into single word or short phrase descriptors. For example, "He is my boyfriend, and we're very close," was reduced to "boyfriend," and "close." The coded descriptions of each S were then examined. Identical codes from different Ss were tallied, and very similar codes were collapsed; for example, "date frequently" and "date often," were combined into a single descriptor, "date frequently," which received two tallies. The relational condition, best liked, same sex friend, yielded 231 descriptors. Best liked, opposite sex friend yielded 139 descriptors, and least liked other yielded 98 descriptors.

Using a type of sort analysis, parallel descriptions were grouped. Emphasis was placed on maintaining intra-group similarity and between-group differences; the fewest possible groups were created. The next step was an interpretive process in which the most reasonable explanation of each group was determined. For example, the group of cards containing the words, "dominating," "rival," "competitive," and "intimidation" was labelled control struggle. Groups were then combined into related clusters, e.g., "positive affect," "intimacy," and the "behavioral manifestations of positive affect" were combined into a cluster or dimension interpreted as Affect.

The relationship between card groups and clusters is interdependent; that is, some card groups easily fell together to form readily interpretable clusters, while in other cases, it was not until a cluster was interpreted that additional card groups fit into the cluster. In the interpretive process we carefully considered competing interpretations at every step of the analysis, and the most logical, easily understandable, yet most meaningful interpretation was chosen.

In the final step of the analysis the frequency of occurrence of descriptors in each cluster was calculated for each relational condition.

Results

The clusters and their component groups which organize the Ss' relational descriptors and the percentage of descriptors comprising each cluster are reported here for each relational condition. A summary of the clusters, their groups, and examples of descriptors which comprise the groups is reported in Table 1. The percentage of descriptors in each cluster are reported in Table 2.

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

Best liked opposite sex friend. For BLOS we identified four clusters: Affect, Support, Approach and Structure. Affect (.41 of the decriptors in BLOS) consists of positive and negative poles of intimacy, positive affection, and behavioral manifestations of positive affection.

Support (.31) appears to be a bridge between Affect and Approach, and incorporates the idea of interdependence. The Approach cluster (.05) contains only behavioral manifestations of approach.

The fourth cluster, Structure (.23) is based on the idea of organization through constraint, and incorporates the concept of shared control, and the impact of temporal and spatial constraint on the relationship. Structure consists of three groups: spatial constraint, temporal constraint, and shared control.

Best liked same sex friend. The relational condition, BLSS, yielded four clusters: Affect, Support, Approach and Structure, which are similar to those clusters described for BLOS. Affect (.24) consists of the groups: intimacy, positive evaluation, and neutral description.

Support (.26) is comprised of a single group. Approach in this relational condition is more accurately Approach-Avoidance (.13) and consists of groups of descriptors of movement both toward and away from relationship. Movement toward is represented by communicative manifestations of positive affect, and communicative manifestations of neutral affect. Movement away from is represented by communicative manifestations of negative affect, and differentiation.

The cluster, Structure (.36), again consists of spatial constraint, temporal constraint, and control.

Least liked other. In the relational condition, LL, four clusters emerged: Affect, Avoidance, Structure, and Incongruity. The first three clusters parallel those in the other two relational conditions, but represent more negative descriptors. Incongruity appears for the first time in LL and indicates a felt discrepancy between the way S thinks his/her partner feels or behaves, and the way the partner says he/she feels or behaves in the relationship. Incongruity (.06) is represented by a single group.

Affect (.24) consists of the groups: neutral, negative evaluation, negative response, and manifestations of negative response. Avoidance (.11) contains two groups: neutral, and behavioral manifestations of avoidance.

Again the groups in Structure (.58) are similar to those within the other two relational conditions, with the exception that here control is control struggle, and a fourth group, demand, appears. Structure consists of spatial constraint, temporal constraint, which is primarily past history, control struggle, and demand.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Parallels among the three relationship types investigated, as well as some anticipated discrepancies, are evident. Affect, Approach-Avoidance, and

Structure emerged as characteristics of all three types, while Support was identified as part of positive relationships, and Incongruity as part of negative ones. Each characteristic is discussed in turn.

Structure. Subjects frequently described controlling aspects of their relationships in terms of how the relationships are structured, especially as they are constrained by time and space. Up to 58% of the descriptors reported for a relational condition (LL) indicated subjects experience their relationships as being defined by the time they spend (or have spent or plan to spend) with the other and by the locations or spatial contexts they share. For example, "roommates" is seen as an adequate (though probably incomplete) description for many relationships. Importantly, these types of constraints are offered as reasons for liking best-like others, but as excuses for knowing least-liked others.

The importance of time and space are especially evident for the least liked other. These constraints not only excuse the relationship, but, in all likelihood, justify the continuation of the relationship. We can't help but speculate that there is a "loyalty" norm operating in the population's culture which is of the order "you can't completely turn your back on an old roommate (or friend of a friend, or workmate, or what-have-you)." Once interdependence has been established, it is extremely difficult to destroy. Not surprisingly, subjects discuss best-liked others primarily in terms of present and future, while least-liked others are talked about in terms of the past and, occasionally, the present.

Temporal and spatial relational definitions also seem to be partially dependent on obligations to a third party. If A likes B, and B likes X, then A is forced to deal with X in some way. A sort of second hand interdependence is established and people find themselves unwilling participants in

relationships not of their own making.

Behaviors which social scientists have typically identified as controling were used as relational descriptors by these subjects. Positive relationships, in particular, were described in this way, but with some qualification. Relationships with best liked opposite sex friends are experienced as mutually controling or symmetrical; decision-making is reported to be shared and influence, bi-lateral. Complimentary control patterns were more frequently reported in best liked same sex dyads, with the subject indicsting that he/she was in the "one up" position about as frequently as the reverse.

Negative relationships, on the other hand, engender a competitive orientation--what might be called escalating symmetry. Several people reported that their least liked other is a "friend" of the same sex, whom they know well and in some cases lived with for a long period of time, but with whom they frequently compete in sports and school. The structure of this type of relationship--one which compels the participants to remain in it while they struggle with each other--bears further investigation.

Negative relationships are also characterized by demands being made by one participant on the other. Subjects described their partners as being "pests" and, interestingly, as doing favors for them, which they apparently saw as a demand for a similar response. Unwanted proximity and behavior which obligates one person to another forces an interdependence that is not mutually desirable. Cultural norms, however, seem to compel at least minimal reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) and the target of favors is trapped.

In summary, Structure seems to encompass the types of demands relational partners place upon one another. In part, stereotypical cultural roles (e.g., roommate, brother) which locate people together in time and space are seen as adequate descriptions of the obligations one participant has to another. In relationships which are less culturally defined, structure must be negotiated

at a more explicit level. The enactments of the negotiation range from mutuality in positive, opposite sex relationships to competititon in negative ones.

Affect. A second primary characteristic of relationships appearing in our data is affect, replicating previous dimensional studies. Allowing it to emerge from the data, rather than defining it a priori permitted a more careful scrutiny of Affect. The result is a multifaceted dimension encompassing positive, neutral and negative affect and comprising a large percentage of descriptors in each relational condition. In contrast to previous research important distinctions in the modes of expression of affect were revealed in this study. Affect embodies evaluation (e.g., "inconsiderate"), description (e.g., "alike"), cognitive response (e.g., "dislike"), and perhaps most importantly, the behavioral manifestations of affect (e.g., "fun," "fight").

This more precise explication of Affect gives greater explanatory power to the concept, and its role in relational description and definition. It is important to know, for example, if a person is evaluating a relationship highly because of active, behavioral events (e.g., fun), or because of more passive, abstract evaluation (e.g., happy). Such information will ultimately yield greater control and predictive power in the relationship.

Support. Based on the frequency of descriptors in this cluster (.31 BLOS. .26 BLSS), Support is a strong relational component, yet, only appeared in the descriptors of the best liked others; neither support nor non-support was reported as a relevant description of negative relationships. Support is superficially related to Affect but is conceptually different. Support generally indicated caretaking and caregiving (e.g., "caring," "comforting," "dependence"), rather than the liking or disliking associated with affect. Items representative of Support were excluded from previous studies or collapsed with Affect items, but we feel its conceptual difference from Affect and its frequent identification by our subjects warrants its presentation as a separate relational characteristic.

Again, the most compelling reason is it gives us additional explanatory power.

Approach-Avoidance. The Approach-Avoidance dimension is not evident in most studies, but appears frequently in the marriage and family literature (see Bochner's, 1977 review), and has been studied extensively by Schutz (1966). Schutz considers inclusion (approach-avoidance) one of the three primary relational needs.

The descriptors of Approach-Avoidance generated in this study are primarily behavioral (e.g., "discuss," "ignore"), and encompass movement toward the other, a kind of motionless state, and movement away from the other. Representatives of this dimension also appear to have been excluded from past research or collapsed with Affect, but have characteristics significantly different from Affect. Approach-Avoidance is often communicative and independent of Affect. In the relational condition, BLSS, for example, approach and avoidance were apparent in such affectively neutral descriptors as "confidant," and "try to separate," respectively.

Summary. While Affect emerged as a primary characteristic of the relationships explored in this study, Control, as a powerful singular dimension, did not. In addition, our subjects described their relationships in terms of Approach-Avoidance and Support, characteristics of relationships which have either been ignored in past research, or collapsed with other dimensions.

A most important outcome of this study is an expanded understanding of control as a relational concept. We use the term Structure to indicate how control can be construed relationally. Specifically, Structure encompasses the constraints, limits and obligations of a given relationship. The structure is the set of expectations which relational participants share and upon which they base judgments of appropriateness (of behavior relevant to this relationship). Contrast this to more monadic conceptualizatons of control, where

one person exercises control upon another or one person is one-up while the other is one-down. These approaches to control treat it as a communicative style in a relational concept, rather than as a feature of the relationship itself. Structure, on the other hand, does not beg the question of which strategy--one-up or one-down--is really controlling. In all but the most unilateral of relationships (e.g., mother-infant) structure is mutually defined.

Affect, on the other hand, was experienced by our subjects in much the way social scientists said they should. It appears to be more broadly defined by relational participants than was previously thought, however. Evaluation, description, cognitive response, and behavioral manifestations all make up the experience of affect.

Support and Approach-Avoidance are also seen by our subjects as relevant relational characteristics. Incongruity appears, but is only minimally represented (.06LL). The extent to which these are generalizable to other populations and other social relationships is still an empirical question.

Finally, we must point out that the descriptive, phenomenological perspective employed in this study permitted us a degree of insight that more mechanical means of data reduction would not have. These findings seem to justify the value of the method.

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Table 1

Dimensions of Relational Communication

[a]Relational condition.
[b]Cluster or dimension.
[c]Groups comprising cluster.
[d]Example of descriptor generated by S.

BEST LIKED[a] OPPOSITE SEX	BEST LIKED SAME SEX	LEAST LIKED
Affect[b]	Affect	Affect
positive intimacy[c] (lover)[d]	intimacy (love, intimate)	neutral (tolerance, casual)
negative intimacy (not intimate)	positive evaluation (happy, cheerful)	neg. evaluation (inconsiderate)
positive affection (not intimate)	neutral description (alike, compatible)	neg. response (dislike)
manifestations (fun)		
Support	Support	
support (comfort, dependable)	support (care, sympathy)	
Approach	Approach-Avoidance	Avoidance
manifestations (discuss relationship)	manifestations of pos. (confidant)	neutral (no closeness)
	manifestations of neutral (feedback, contact)	manifestations (ignore, never talk)
	manifestations of neg. (no metacommunication)	
	differentiation (try to separate)	
Structure	Structure	Structure
spatial constraint (live near)	spatial constraint (roommate, schoolmate)	spatial constraint (chance proximity)
time (goals for future)	time (long term)	time (divorced, were serious)
shared control (equal)	control (gives advice, influences decisions	control struggle (competitive, rival)
		demand (pest, demands help)
		Incongruity
		incongruity (insincere, acts like friend)

Table 2

Occurrence of Dimensions Within Relational Conditions

[a]Reported as percentage of total for relational condition.

	Affect	Support	Structure	Approach-Avoid	Incongruity
BLOS	.41[a]	.31	.23	.05	
BLSS	.24	.26	.36	.13	
LL	.24		.58	.11	.06